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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8909  
INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1372  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1550  
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0022  
RUEPADJ/CJTF-HOA J2X CAMP LEMONIER DJ  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000540

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LONDON FOR AFRICA WATCHERS, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGO ER

SUBJECT: PRESBYTERIANS RELEASED, TELL A STRANGE TALE

REF: ASMARA 421

Classified By: CDA Jennifer A. McIntyre for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During the week of May 28, the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) released on bail the last seven church members of the Mehrete Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian church. The members had been detained since their arrest on April 29 (reftel). During a meeting with Poloff on June 15, church leader Rev. Zecharias Abraham detailed the cause for their arrest and the machinations that occurred to secure their release. In a bizarre story of religious politics, Rev. Zecharias identified Rev. Asfaha Mehari, the leader of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (one of four registered religious institutions in Eritrea), as the instigator for the arrests. According to Rev. Zecharias, GSE officials told him that Rev. Asfaha triggered the arrests by sending a letter to the Eritrean police alleging that the Mehrete Yesus church was pro-Ethiopian and a front for U.S. intelligence activities. A month-long tussle ensued between the GSE's Office of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Defense, National Security Office, Office of the President and the police to resolve the issue. This unverifiable, yet believable story is an excellent example of how a climate of fear and secret bureaucratic maneuvering has permeated the day-to-day existence of Eritreans. End summary.

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PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ACCUSED OF ANTI-GSE ACTIVITIES  
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¶2. (C) Rev. Zecharias explained to Poloff the history of tension between the Mehrete Yesus Church and Rev. Asfaha. According to Rev. Zecharias, Rev. Asfaha has worked relentlessly over the past five years to bring the Mehrete Yesus Church under the authority of his own Evangelical Lutheran Church, possibly in an effort to increase his congregation numbers. However, given the doctrinal differences between the two churches, neither the Mehrete Yesus Church nor the Evangelical Lutheran Church elders were interested in a merger and Rev. Zecharias has been able to derail Rev. Asfaha's previous attempts. As part of the on-going saga, Rev. Asfaha wrote a letter to the police (seen by Rev. Zecharias after his release) alleging anti-GSE activity at the Mehrete Yesus Church. Given the GSE's culture of suspicion about the activities of unofficial religious groups, the police (and not National Security officials as previously surmised and reported in reftel) felt this accusation was sufficient enough to arrest the entire

congregation and initiate an investigation independently.  
(Comment: Under GSE law, the police are permitted to arrest and detain individuals without charge for up to 28 days. End Comment.)

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THE POLICE MAKE THE ARRESTS AND THEN SEEK BACKUP  
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¶3. (C) On April 29, the day of the arrests, Rev. Zecharias called Semare Beyene of the Office of Religious Affairs to inform the Office that the police were at the church. After the police arrested the entire congregation, Rev. Zecharias attempted to negotiate with the police commissioner at the police station, informing him that the church was not Pentecostal and had permission from the GSE to worship. The commissioner expressed surprise to hear the church was not Pentecostal; nonetheless, he refused to release the congregation and accused Rev. Zecharias of forging the permission letters.

¶4. (C) The following day, the police contacted the Office of Religious Affairs as part of their investigation. According to Rev. Zecharias' sources, the police told the Office of Religious Affairs that the church was operating illegally and that the two Americans linked to the church were agents of the USG. The Office of Religious Affairs, familiar with the church and the resident U.S. missionaries refuted the police claim. Thus began a month-long battle between the two offices for control and resolution of the case.

¶5. (C) During the next two weeks, the police contacted the Office of National Security with the same deliberate

ASMARA 00000540 002 OF 002

misinformation about the circumstances behind the arrests. The police appeared to be playing on national security concerns in order to garner support from this powerful office during their investigation. The National Security Office, (which allegedly supervises the Office of Religious Affairs although the hierarchy is not clear), refused to engage themselves with the police efforts. Seeking support from another powerful GSE office, the police reportedly contacted General Filipos of the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) and Minister of Defense Sebhat Efrem. Allegedly, the police claimed to the EDF that the church was hiding young people in order to shield them from the national service draft and that the Office of Religious Affairs was also involved in illegal activities. The EDF also declined to become involved and referred the police back to the Office of Religious Affairs.

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CONGREGATION QUESTIONED BUT PERMITTED TO WORSHIP  
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¶6. (C) Unfortunately, due to the slow response of the Office of Religious Affairs and the distractions surrounding the upcoming Eritrean Independence Day on May 24, the congregation remained in detention throughout most of May. During this time, congregation members were subjected to numerous inquisitions about church activities and involvement. The police questioned Rev. Zecharias on several occasions about the church activities, its source of funds and the role and involvement of the American missionaries in the church. In addition, he was asked to answer questions about Mehrete Yesus Church's affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, to include why they maintained separate churches and about his ordination as a minister. The police questioned the other members of the church and at one point subjected congregation members to beatings. Rev. Zecharias was able to intercede on behalf of the church members and the beatings ceased. Surprisingly, despite the alleged reasoning behind the arrests, the jail guards permitted the members of the congregation to gather and stage small worship services with prayer and a homily on each of the four Sundays of their detention.

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THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT INTERVENES  
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¶7. (C) Eventually, the Office of Religious Affairs secured a meeting with Office of the President representative Yemane Ghebremeskel and the head of the Office of National Security, Abraha Kassa. The meeting participants discussed the situation and decided to release the congregation. Following this decision, the police released all but seven of the detainees on or around May 21. The remaining detainees, which included Rev. Zecharias and other church elders, were finally released on May 28. Rev. Zecharias reported that during the final week of detention, the police ceased interrogating the detainees. No church members were asked to recant their faith.

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COMMENT  
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¶8. (C) Post initially viewed the targeting of the Mehrete Jesus Church as yet more GSE persecution of Christians in Eritrea, and a possible signaling of a new wave of arrests of unregistered religious groups. According to Rev. Zecharias, this was not the case. His bizarre, yet plausible, story provides another example of Eritrea's devolution into a police state, in which the citizens live in a climate of secrecy and fear, where one person can initiate a series of actions that persecutes nearly 80 people and only the President's closest advisors have the power and authority to intervene. End Comment.

MCINTYRE